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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

PARTICIPANTS: Jorge Contreras (not his real name but the "nom de guerre" by which he is known to the Embassy)
William H. Hallman, Political Counselor,
American Embassy, Buenos Aires
James Blystone, Regional Security Officer,
American Embassy, Buenos Aires

DATE & PLACE: August 7, 1979; American Embassy, Buenos Aires

SUBJECT : Nuts and Bolts of the Government's Repression of
Terrorism-Subversion

Secret Detention Centers. I asked Mr. Contreras his opinion of whether large numbers of secret detention centers still exist. First he cautioned me: one must have in mind the complicated pattern of the government's repression of terrorism-subversion, and the fact that each of the many government entities involved run their own operations. In the past these discrete entities worked with little regulation, or with wide authority to interpret those rules and regulations that did exist. Also, each entity tried to maintain its own staff, facilities, etc., and each organization worked in secrecy. Although there was some sharing of information of coordinating bodies, security was handled on a strictly interpreted "need to know" basis.

Therefore, said Mr. Contreras, anything he might say on this subject should be understood to be based upon his own limited experience within his own organization plus a sensitivity to questions and issues he developed in his occupation. Implied in his account was that a certain amount of "leakage" exists between organizations, but that anything in this category is hearsay.

He went on to say that it was his personal opinion nevertheless that beginning about one year ago between "80 percent and 90 percent"

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of these secret detention facilities were closed. Repeating his assertion that it is virtually impossible to be certain about another unit's or service's detention centers, Contreras went on to state his personal belief that for example the Naval Mechanics School has not been used as a detention/interrogation center now for about one year. At a point later in the conversation Contreras said that in preparation for the September visit of the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights area in which the centers had existed are now being given new purposes and being remodeled. Thus if the Commission asked to see the location of a (former) secret detention center upon arrival there its members would not find bare walls and unused space -- which could suggest recent use for unknowable purposes -- but rather offices with desks, warehouses with goods, etc.

I asked Contreras why the centers had been closed. He said that it was a matter of fewer targets, less input and attrition. Numbers of "disappearances" sharply diminished in 1978, and there was sharper reduction still during 1979 -- disappearances, in fact have virtually stopped. There simply is no need to maintain large holding centers.

I reminded Mr. Contreras that (at another point of our conversation) he had told me that of the six young people who were disappeared by a security force on May 12 (Comment: See Buenos Aires ____), three of them might still be alive and might be resurfaced. I asked Contreras where, in the absence of clandestine detention centers, these people might in fact be. He replied that - he had not said that they were all closed, but rather that there was no need to maintain space for large numbers of people. Three people were "nothing" in comparison with the holding problems of

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the past. Even if other well publicized 1979 desaparees were alive -- Mrs. Jara de Cabezas, for example, or the Barreiros -- this would still present no problem to a system that had accommodated large numbers in the past.

With regard to specific locations, at one point in the conversation I mentioned a body of evidence of the earlier existence of a secret detention center on the Paseo de Colon. Several people "processed" through that center subsequently were released, left Argentina and have spoken of it from the safety of Spain or Italy. The building in which the center was housed was subsequently razed as part of a highway building project. Contreras smiled and said "well you're dead right about that one." He admitted having personal knowledge of two other detention-interrogation centers in the federal capital, but he did not offer to elaborate.

Fate of the Disappeared. I said that from what Contreras had told us about the closing of the clandestine detention centers it appeared that persons who disappeared into them were somehow "processed" and somehow disposed of "at the other end." How was this accomplished?

In his reply Contreras talked about two categories of cases. The first was that of people who were put into the system and after "careful interrogation" were found to have no connection with subversion. Many of these, Contreras asserted, were simply let go. He said that he believes that in the past others were killed, lest their release constitute a risk for "the system" -- personnel involved, locations, etc. (Contreras emphasized that he believes these executions were common two and three years ago but had become uncommon in the past year.) Again,

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he said, much depended upon the personnel of the detention center: some commanders were willing to risk their operations' and their facility's becoming known in order to restore someone whose innocence had been established. Other commanders believed that the process was more important than any individual, and that even the innocent must be sacrificed lest the system itself be jeopardized.

The second category that Contreras described that of people who during interrogation were discovered indeed to have some links with terrorism or subversion. Contreras/^{implied}(without saying this precisely) that prisoners were executed if they had caused deaths or endangered lives (working with bombs or armaments for example) after their usefulness as source material for finding other subversives or terrorists was exhausted. Prisoners not so deeply involved were treated in a variety of ways -- mostly depending upon their own willingness to cooperate with security authorities. Some people were never ever given "hard interrogations" because quickly after their entrance into the system they let it be known they were willing. Others agreed to cooperate as a result of their interrogation. Even some of the prisoners who at some point agreed to cooperate were killed, but according to Contreras many other were exfiltrated abroad after their usefulness was ended, others surfaced in jails as PEN prisoners and others were allowed to "work out of their homes." (At another point in the conversation Contreras mentioned that he was still working with several people who were "in their homes." The government's main purpose of enlisting cooperation was to get the identities of other subversives. In many cases members of subversive groups did not know the names of their associates. In these cases

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prisoners were used as spotters in neighborhoods where their former friends might be found, or to confirm the identity of someone brought into "the system."

I asked several times what the length of the "process" might be, and got the impression each time from Contreras that this was a "How long is a piece of string?" kind of question. Contreras refused to be led into speculating. There was no way, he said, of generalizing about the length of time the process took. He did, however, say that it was his opinion that persons who disappeared early in the game would never turn up again.

(Contrera's statement that many people who were not responsible for deaths had somehow cleared the system" combined interestingly with a remark Colonel San Roman made to me on July 30 -- reported in a separate memorandum of conversation -- that "many had saved themselves." Quite by accident the Embassy heard just after the conversation with Contreras from a journalist colleague here in Buenos Aires that two people believed to be "permanent disappeareds" had reportedly recently turned up and communicated from abroad with their families. One of the persons was a former ERP stretcher bearer named Luis Lopez Comendador. Lopez Comendador was taken from his home two years ago and no new of him had been heard until one of his friends telephoned from Paris to his girl friend here that he was alive. Another case was that of a former Montonero who disappeared two years ago and is reported recently to have telephoned from Paris to his medical doctor father in La Plata saying that he would like to come home and needed money. The young man reportedly commented that he was living in a colony of Argentine exiles. One other case reported involves the son of

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a well known television personality. Marcos Tucker, who has said his son has turned up alive in Paris.)

Organization and Structure. Jorge Contreras is the director of a Task Force 7 of the "Reunion Central" section of the 601 Army Intelligence Unit. His task force was created during May, along with Task Force 6, which follows labor and economics. The job of Task Force 7 to study the activities of students, political groups and religious bodies. Until a few months ago the task force system created in 1971-1972 has only five such groups: Task Force 1 concerned itself with the ERP; Task Force 2 was concerned with the Montoneros; on this occasion Contreras did not go into the duties of Task Forces 3, 4 and 5.

Contreras described the work of his task force as intelligence gathering and analysis. He said that a new idea of the "Reunion Central" organization was that intelligence gathering and analytical functions must be gotten out of the operating units. A central problem in trying to control the anti-subversive campaign was the fact that the same person who received intelligence about allegedly subversive activities was the person whose responsibility it was to make arrests, conduct interrogations, etc. Competition among many units put a high premium on fast action, which often meant that action was ill considered. The system theoretically works now so that Task Forces 6 and 7 do their research and analysis and then pass information to the other task forces with a recommendation regarding the kind of action to be taken. Contreras admits that the other task force commanders are still free to act upon his suggestions as they see fit or are guided by orders from

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higher authority -- he cannot impose his recommendations.

Even with the system newly balanced and with new lines drawn there are overlapping jurisdictions, just within the 601st. There exists for example something called "Company A," which is within the 601st but not a part of "Reunion Central." Company A has the same area of responsibility -- students, politics and religion -- that Task Force 7 has, and the Company A commander still feels that he has and should continue to have the right to operate as he sees fit, without prior consultation with units of "Reunion Central."

It is this diffusion of authority and responsibility that permitted -- as recently as May 12, according to Contreras' comments on the disappearance of Jorge Sznaider and five other young people -- the "ultra-left handed operation. "Left handed operations" in the vocabulary of the trade means anything that is extra-legal. "Ultra left handed" means an operation authorized and or run by a junior unit commander without higher permission or knowledge. If the operation netted a terrorist or subversive group -- member it would be publicized. If it brought in a house wife or "someone's aunt" or an embarrassment it could be denied by everyone.

Contreras explains that "Reunion Central" is a unit housed at the 601st and operationally a part of that entity but containing Army, Navy, Air Force and Federal security elements. The "Reunion Central" was established at the beginning of the military government, and remains in place. Contreras said that one of the operational problems "Reunion Central" faces is that with the notable exception of the Navy other services and units are unwilling to send their best men to act as liaison officers, but prefer to

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keep their best men back in their own service intelligence units.

A Colonel Teppedino is Commander of the 601st. A Colonel Aries Duval is the head of "Reunion Central". Contreras says that the task force commanders are for the most part lieutenant colonels. In addition to the seven Task Forces of "Reunion Central" there is "a general situation" unit better described in English as an "analytical section" which is further divided into two sub-sections. One sub-section deals with activities of the Chinese and the Russians. (Cuban activities and, when they had an embassy here, that of the North Koreans is included within the jurisdiction of this intelligence-analytical unit.) The other section is called the "Trotskyite" analysis section. Contreras's wife is the new head of the first of these units, replacing her husband when he became a task force commander. A Colonel Peña heads the "Trotskyite" analysis unit.

Contreras emphasized again the problem of competing jurisdictions. The Navy and the Air Force each has its own intelligence unit, each with an anti-subversive anti-terrorist part, and its own operating units. (The two may in fact be the same.) In addition to the Army's participation in the activities of the 601st and the "Reunion Central" subdivision of the 601st, each corps commander has his own intelligence-operations apparatus. Activities of these groups are played upon yet another patchwork of geographical "zone commanders," who exist apart from the other hierarchy. Contreras says it has been his observation that zone commanders in turn play fast and loose with geographic limits of power and responsibility, and if they come upon information within their zones of allegedly subversive activities going on elsewhere they

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do not hesitate to carry out activities in other areas -- with or without the knowledge and/or permission of the other zone commander.

Events in the separate jurisdictions may go in completely different directions. I asked specifically about the case of the Partido Socialista de Trabajadores, numbers of whom were picked up in Mar del Plata late last year and others in Rosario. Eight or ten of the Mar del Plata disappearances stayed disappeared -- nothing has been heard from them at all. People who were apprehended in Rosario however surfaced a short time later under PEN and subsequently were given trials and sentenced. (Notice of their sentences was widely published at the time.) Contreras took credit for the relatively fair and orderly Rosario events -- "that was our operation." "On the other hand what happened down in Mar del Plata was somebody else -- I wouldn't be able to say who."

About Contreras. The question why Contreras comes and tells us these stories must be examined.

He admits that he has been authorized to talk with members of this Embassy by his bosses Aries Duval and Teppedino. (COMMENT: Without having hard evidence of this we believe that these contacts are authorized also by Army Commander Viola. Contreras himself may or may not know about this higher approval.) Basically, then, Contreras's presentations can be put in the category of "authorized information" designed perhaps to reassure the Embassy and/or, perhaps, "learn" through questions that Contreras receives from Embassy officers what members of the Embassy have learned about the repressive apparatus. Despite having this authorization Contreras says that there is a certain amount of risk involved

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in these contacts. Since if other security services knew of them he might be accused of treacherous cooperation with a foreign power.

My personal view is that Contreras says more than he is strictly authorized to say. In his presentation his own ideas and actions take on the cast of righteousness. He is anxious, for his own reasons about which we can only speculate, to have the goodwill -- or at least the understanding -- of members of the Embassy.

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